

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

Philip K Dick, 1968

Stephen Baxter takes the Voight-Kampff test.

Nearly 30 years ago Philip K Dick, 39 years old, published the novel that became the centrepiece of his career. In 1982 Ridley Scott adapted *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to become the movie *Blade Runner*, which would bring Dick's name to a wide audience. But there's much more to the book than that, influential as the movie remains, and it's a good entry point to Dick's work.

Androids, set in San Francisco 1992, is the story of Rick Deckard, hunter of androids ("replicants" in the film). Earth has been left poisoned and depopulated by a "World War Terminus", and androids, meant as servant-slaves for colony worlds, have been leaking back to the home world. "Do androids dream?" Deckard asks himself. "Evidently; that's why they occasionally kill their employers and flee here."

These machines with their Nexus-6 brain matrices are indistinguishable from humans – save only that they entirely lack empathy. Deckard has a test to detect this, and the horror of the book (and the movie) comes from the androids' deadened responses. The artificial girl Pris is cold, "like... the breath from the vacuum between the inhabited worlds... it was not what she did or said but what she did *not* do and say."

Dick had a bleak view of the world, and his books constantly question whether what we see is real, or the result of deliberate manipulation. All this was a product of his own turbulent life.

Philip Kindred Dick was born in Chicago in 1928. "Started reading SF when I was 12," he said. "Accidentally bought a copy of *Stirring Science Stories* instead of *Popular Science*. Never able to stop, once started." All his five marriages ended in divorce. From 1952, aged 24, he was a full-time writer, but in the '50s SF publishers were generally low paying. Heavy drug use made Dick's life still more troubled.

Dick became paranoid after a visit from the FBI in 1955, following a letter he'd written to a Soviet scientist. Fascinated



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by mental illness, he speculated that he might be ill himself, perhaps schizoid. He was a "flipped-out freak", he said.

All these influences funnelled into Dick's work. Decker's androids sum up Dick's endless questioning of what is real, and what makes us human. But if reality is unreliable, one thing that's dependable in his work is human kindness. He was well aware that some humans would fail Deckard's empathy test. He'd tell the true story of a Nazi concentration camp officer who complained at being woken by the noise of crying children.

In *Androids* people derive consolation

from an "empathy machine", a kind of shared virtual reality: "He experienced them, the others, incorporated the babble of their thoughts, heard in his own brain the noise of their many individual existences." Perhaps Dick would have been impressed by the internet, which joins people together by emails and blogs and in shared virtual spaces.

Twenty-five years after *Blade Runner*, Dick's legacy is profound. Cyberpunk drank deep of his dystopian visions, and adaptations of his work continue to be made. It's easy to see why his work still resonates. Saturated by surveillance, bombarded by hidden threats, we too are paranoid. Today, the plot structure of *Androids*, with an immense disaster in the world war followed by a continuing struggle against the android menace, feels like a metaphor for the story of the West since 9/11, with the initial horror of the attack followed by a slow-burning campaign of terrorism. Similarly, in Dick-influenced shows like *Lost* and *The 4400* you have characters trying to put their lives back together after a catastrophe while coping with a carnival of ongoing strangeness and threat.

In early 1982 Dick saw rushes of *Blade Runner*. He said Ridley Scott's 2019 LA in was "exactly as how I'd imagined it". But he died of a stroke four months before the movie was released, aged 53. As of 2004, the movies made from his work had made \$700 million. But Dick didn't live to see any of it, or how his ideas continue to resonate in the consciousness of a new century. **SFX**

Stephen Baxter's latest novel, The H-Bomb Girl (a kids' book about a girl in 1962 Liverpool) is published 20 September.

Like This? Try These!

***I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov (1950)**

Nothing to do with the Will Smith movie really, this is Asimov's classic and thoughtful definition of how robots *should* be controlled (it also marked the first appearance of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics). Anti-Dick.



***Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human* by KW Jeter (1995)**

The first of three pretty good authorised sequels (to the movie, rather than the book). The others are *Replicant Night* (1996) and *Eye and Talon* (2000).



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>> "What struck me is the treatment of humanity and its relationship with animals. It's not just a question of functionality, food or companionship – in this dystopia the animals define wealth, status and identity." **blessedarethegeek**

>> "Love it. The animals are part of the universe in such a huge way – I really think a movie adaptation that takes this into account would be great. In perfect PKD style they turn everything surreal." **THX**

>> "I read this years ago and didn't like it. Having just finished it again I found I loved it. Not sure if that's because my outlook has changed, or whether I simply didn't understand it as a younger person. It's a tale about empathy that you can genuinely empathise with." **DocSavage**

>> "As an 'ideas man' he's among the highest, but he really was a poor novelist. A well-rounded SF book collection is like lesbian porn. It does not need, nor should it have, any Dick in it." **Jedit**

>> "The way that Mercerism is used to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality gives a similar effect to the book that drug psychosis does in *A Scanner Darkly*." **Shoesworth**

>> "What impressed me was the growing sense of ambiguity, with the reality of Deckard's life called into question and human characters seemingly less 'real' than the androids." **Ghyste**

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>> In *SFX163* Christopher Priest will be discussing *Pavane*. Keith Roberts's alternate history novel from 1968.

NEXT ISSUE: Tom Holt on Iain Banks's 1988 Culture novel *The Player of Games*.